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After the tsunami : the remaking of everyday life in Banda Aceh, Indonesia

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Conclusion

In the afternoon of April 11, 2012, an 8.6 magnitude earthquake hit Aceh. The US Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami warning, as the epicenter of the earthquake had been under the Indian Ocean, just like the one in 2004. People panicked to get away from the coastal areas, moving out of Banda Aceh in long traffic jams. I was in the Netherlands and followed the news on the internet, as I did not manage to get in contact with my friends in Aceh by phone. Two hours after the first quake, another one struck, again followed by a tsunami warning. Only later that night the warning was cancelled, but some of my friends, I learned later, stayed out of town until the following morning. When I called my friends and host families the next day, they told me about the panic and the fear. They told me how the earth had moved like a wave, just like seven years ago; how their families became dispersed in the flight and were hard to reunite, because cell phones did not work. They told me how they stayed with friends in inland villages or at the side of the road while darkness fell. How everybody had *trauma*; how they had thought that their neighborhoods would be gone again; how they prayed and left everything up to God.

At the time I called, however, everything seemed to have gone back to normal. Civil servants had gone to their offices and children were at school. Everyday life was once again remade in the awareness that disaster could strike anytime. More than seven years after the disaster, the earthquakes triggered embodied memories through *trauma* and showed forcefully that the long aftermath of the tsunami had not yet ended, if it ever could.

In this dissertation I argue that we may better understand the long-term process of remaking everyday life when we study post-disaster experiences through the ethnography of subjectivity. The ethnography of subjectivity is a significant addition to the anthropology of disaster that has until recently predominantly focused on historically shaped processes of vulnerability and social and cultural change (see Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999, 2002, Oliver-Smith 1996). It sheds light on individual experiences and the ways in which the social is “refracted” in these experiences (Strassler 2010). At the same time it enables us to grasp the creativity, moral ambiguity and everyday considerations through which people shape their worlds. The focus on subjectivity brings together individual experience and social change and illuminates how they mutually shape each other. The processes through which subjectivities are continuously made are enlarged in times of disorder and social upheaval and it is exactly in these times that the limits of what is socially possible are stretched (Biehl et al. 2007b, Good et al. 2008). I argue that it is therefore a particularly useful approach to get at the processes of remaking everyday life; to shed light on what the

disaster does, not only to (structural) socio-historical change, but also to the individual experience and creativity through which histories are made and lived.

I have done this in several ways throughout the dissertation. Thereby I have drawn attention to the role of time as an actor in making and remaking subjectivities. While subjectivity is made in the present, it is continuously influenced by past experiences. These experiences include not only the tsunami but also pre-tsunami life and post-tsunami reconstruction. 'After the tsunami', I proposed in the introduction of this dissertation, implies the 'before'. Foregrounding these continuities, in chapter three I made clear how moral dispositions that had been created over a lifetime (Zigon 2009a) shaped the process of post-tsunami grieving and were influenced by this process. Already central to everyday life before the tsunami, Islam became crucial to grieving and remaking after the disaster. As many tsunami survivors saw the disaster as an act of God, they interpreted the tsunami as an opportunity for religious improvement of themselves and society. Islamic practices were central to the experience of emotions and to dealing with grief, rather than contradicting grieving as the dominant discourse of 'strong and pious Acehnese' seemed to suggest. The ways in which people invoked the moral framework of grieving as 'human' to deal with this possible moral ambiguity, shows how subjectivity is always a becoming (Biehl and Locke 2010), never determined by a single discourse or institution, shaped in the space between multiple social dimensions and individual experiences.

Similarly, different temporalities influenced the post-tsunami remaking of everyday life. Instead of being mutually exclusive, temporalities of Islam and development received heightened importance in the post-tsunami 'improvement momentum' (chapter five). Explained as an act of God, the tsunami made the final end of the world imminent and immanent (Kermode 1967) for many Muslims in Aceh, thereby urging them to become more pious. But the emphasis on the approaching Day of Judgment did not contradict the sense that the tsunami was an opportunity for development towards modernity. Many ordinary people adopted and changed the state discourse of 'building back better' to the benefit of their own future and that of Aceh.

The strong feeling that after decades of conflict and a devastating disaster Aceh was finally 'seen' by 'the world', something that materialized in the billions of dollars donated for the reconstruction of Aceh after the disaster and the hundreds of international aid agencies that came to help, contributed to the interpretation of the tsunami as an opportunity for Aceh to 'develop' and thereby regain its "place-in-the-world" (Ferguson 2006). In the now dominant historical narrative of Acehnese nationalism, this 'place', which had once been occupied by the Islamic sultanates, was lost when the Dutch conquered Aceh and incorporated it in the Netherlands Indies, and later, when Aceh became part of Indonesia. In chapter one I suggested that people actively tried to remake the historical connections with the international community, especially the Muslim world,

by glossing international tsunami aid as a 'gift'. Rather than being humiliating, as is sometimes suggested in post-disaster contexts (see Korf 2007), reciprocating the gift with gratitude seemed, to many people in Aceh, to open up the possibility of continuing relationships with the international community in the future. At the same time, people considered the assistance from the national government as an entitlement. This view of entitlement to tsunami aid houses informed the subject position of 'tsunami victim'. The way in which the state was held accountable to its promise of aid houses both questioned its transparency and reinforced its tenuous legitimacy. I suggest therefore that through the complex arena of social actors that formed the "witches' brew" (Li 2007) of reconstruction, new subjectivities emerged that on the one hand redefined relations between people in Aceh and the national government by holding the state accountable for the reconstruction assistance to the tsunami survivors and on the other hand informed the imagination of Aceh's past and future place in the world.

Whereas the state-directed reconstruction process officially finished in April 2009, remaking the everyday is always an unfinished process. Although the survivors will never forget the disaster, they do move to a state of 'not always' remembering, by giving memory a 'place' (chapters three and four). Chapter four addressed the ways in which memory assumed such a place in urban space, in which collective memory was 'clustered' in memorial places, while an everyday spatial forgetfulness enabled remaking a world. Importantly, time becomes part of space and is lived in "embodied space" (Low 2009), through people's subjective engagements with places and imaginations of their pasts and futures.

Another 'place' of memory can be found in narratives. Throughout this dissertation I have created a narrative through which I aimed to convey a 'truth' that is relational, found and created in the reality of relations between individual actions and social life (Hastrup 2004). The open-endedness and uncertainty of this reality become especially clear in the rumors of child trafficking that form "subjunctivizing elements" (Good 1994) in narratives of loss. In this dissertation I created my narrative by focusing on and retelling the narratives of tsunami survivors. In their narratives the tsunami itself was central. In chapter two we saw how "narrative experience" (Steedly 1993) of the tsunami is embodied and is created in the present, bringing together narrative time and narrated time (Desjarlais 2003). Narrative experiences also bring together social and collective narrative elements with personal experience. The refractions of social dimensions in individual narrative experiences show how subjectivity is created in the shadow of disaster. Most strikingly, the out-of-the-ordinary bodies of the dead and the living came to define the event of the tsunami in relation to the newly emerging everyday. While the tsunami narratives of out-of-the-ordinary bodies express the horror of the disaster, the possibility of their narration also reveals the resilience of the survivors as they 'worked' through the process of grieving

– shaping this process through religious practices as well as experiences of *trauma*, loss, acceptance, fear and sadness, sincerity and surrender, remembering and ‘not always’ remembering. However, the silence that falls where narratives stop or become impossible makes us aware of narrative impossibilities and the limits to what we can understand about the subjectivity of others (Good 2012).

The province of Aceh has gone through rapid transformations over the last decade. An emerging field of scholarship focuses on political changes, post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation, Acehnese histories, religious everyday and institutional changes after the implementation of Shari’a law, and post-tsunami reconstruction. This dissertation contributes an ethnographic perspective on post-tsunami remaking to this growing scholarly field. In this way, I hope it will not only be a contribution to the anthropology of disaster, but also an ethnographic account of a turbulent period in the history of Aceh. By showing how ordinary people navigate through social changes I have intended to highlight not only how they experience and imagine ‘Aceh’ and how the remaking of their everyday lives is influenced by the tsunami, what came after the tsunami, as well as the ‘before’, but also how they creatively adopt and adapt institutional discourses that influence but never determine their everyday lives.

As prefigured in the introduction, the dissertation contains no policy advices; no recommendations for improvement of post-disaster humanitarian assistance (cf. Li 2007). Instead, it critically reflects on what reconstruction came to ‘mean’ to the disaster survivors. However, even though the dissertation retains a critical scholarly distance, the insights it provides and the voices it reflects are part of an ethical effort of anthropological engagement (cf. Low 2011). I hope therefore that this dissertation may be both a contribution to the social scientific understanding of what it means to live a life in the shadow of crisis and engage the reader in the mutual effort of moral empathy (Smith and Kleinman 2009) that may affect all of our actions in social life, whether policy oriented or not.

What does it mean to remake a world (Das et al. 2001)? What does it mean to go back to a normality that is never like it used to be (Ivy 1995)? What is at stake for the people living through the disaster and its aftermath (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991)? My engagement with these questions has led us to a range of stories, observations, reflections and experiences. It also leads to new questions, as is perhaps always the case in anthropology as it tries to stay close to the continuous unfolding of social life itself. Does the ‘post-tsunami’ ever end? Or will it fade away as new ‘post-s’ emerge? How will the disaster in the long term reverberate in political and religious subjectivities and how will people’s always emerging subjectivities change Aceh’s and Indonesia’s socio-political arena? In this dissertation I propose that the anthropology of disaster would benefit from

attending to the construction of subjectivity. Comparing insights from different parts of the world where people remake their lives after a disaster and relating these insights to the literature on post-conflict remaking and social suffering, sheds additional light on our common humanity as well as the different, subjective paths that people take and create in the aftermath of crisis. While people in Banda Aceh create new social worlds and imagine their futures in multiple ways, time keeps connecting tsunami experience, what came before, and what happened thereafter, in the present in which people continue to remake everyday life after the tsunami.

